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# Practicum and Laboratory Experiences: A Conceptual Model

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Abstract

A rationale for including practicum and laboratory experiences within the teacher education program is discussed. The organization of these experiences within the teacher education program as well as the responsibilities that various program faculty perform is outlined. Finally, the nature of the planned experiences that represent the core of this conceptual model is described.

## Practicum and Laboratory Experiences: A Conceptual Model

"Professors of education should exemplify what they explicate." (Howsam, Corrigan, Denemark, and Nash, 1976, p. 91) In other words, practice what you preach. The practicum component of the teacher education curriculum has received its fair share of preaching. Unfortunately, professors of education and the institutions they represent on many occasions have been guilty of not following through with practice.

This article will present a conceptual model of the practicum and laboratory experiences to be offered within the teacher education curriculum. This model is meant to be a reflection of the beliefs explicated by teacher educators. It consists of a planned sequential series of student laboratory and practicum experiences which constitute the central implementing core of the teacher education curriculum. Extending over the entire four-year, these experiences make up the hub around which other professional curricular components may be planned and implemented. Taken concurrently with general studies, theory courses, and behavioral studies, these experiences are designed to color the glasses through which preservice teachers perceive general studies content and professional theory. The main text of this article is divided into three major parts. First, a rationale for the model is given. Secondly, the organization of the practicum and laboratory experiences within the teacher education curriculum is briefly described. Finally,

the content of the model is outlined and discussed.

## Rationale

The rationale for including practicum and laboratory experiences in the teacher education curriculum is extensive. Probably the most agreed upon reason is: "to demonstrate educational theory into practice and to facilitate the student teacher's development of teaching skills from the theories learned." (Ebro, Note 1). These experiences have at least three other purposes for being including into the curriculum. First, they are designed to enable preservice teachers to reflect upon and evaluate their own teaching behaviors in light of: (a) what they are learning in professional courses, (b) what they observe inservice teachers doing and saying, and (c) what peers and professors offer during feedback and synthesizing seminars. Secondly, freshman and sophomore experiences are designed "to assist a student to discover if teaching is what he really wants to do and actually can do." (Andrews, 1964, p. 20). Put another way, this is a time for accepting personal and professional responsibilities and realizing one's growth which stems from meeting such responsibilities. Finally, the junior and senior experiences emphasize opportunities "to permit a student to demonstrate that his ability and potential warrant recommendation for a teaching certificate." (Andrews, 1964, p. 20.)

Seminars which accompany these practicum and laboratory experiences fulfill various purposes. They are intended to promote self-directed teachers who can reflect on the effectiveness of teaching-learning experiences enabling students to move toward stated educational goals.

More specifically, they are designed to:

1. Guide student insight into teacher roles, teaching skills, management skills, and planning skills.

2. Facilitate student understanding of perceived differences and similarities in the physical, emotional, and social attributes of pupils in various settings.

3. "Pull out" special concerns such as pupil developmental stages, peer interactions, and self concepts as future topics to which theory can be related.

4. Provide instruction and structure for student observations.

5. Facilitate planning of future student teaching experiences including sharing projected objectives, possible subject matter content, potential strategies, useful resources, and techniques of evaluation.

6. Provide a forum for synthesizing evaluations of teaching experiences as recorded through student logs, videotapes, and feedback from peers, professors, and pupils.

7. Enable student conceptualization of new insights about self, learners, society, and the teaching process.

8. Facilitate understanding of basic facts and principles regarding the structure and organization of the educational system (Friedenberg as cited in McCarty, 1973).

9. Provide support for students relative to their professional and personal needs.

## Organization

The planning and implementation of practicum and laboratory ex-

periences is coordinated by a joint committee consisting of campus-based teacher educators, inservice teachers, financially compensated adjunct professors, and preservice teachers. There are several advantages to employing adjunct professors who serve professional roles both in the public schools and in the college/university setting. These include:

1. Adjunct professors who serve as supervisors of student practicum and laboratory experiences can be strategically placed over a wide geographical area, thus preventing overcrowding in school systems adjacent to teacher education institutions (Howsam, 1976).

2. Adjunct professors serve as exempliary teaching models.

3. Travel time to and from schools to supervise students is significantly reduced (Howsam, 1976).

4. Adjunct professors can communicate insightful information to campus-based teacher educators concerning the preservice and inservice needs of teachers.

5. Adjunct professors provide for continuity in supervising preservice teachers. Many times this is not the case, i.e., graduate students who are not familiar with an institution's teacher education program are assigned the responsibility of supervising preservice teachers.

6. Employing adjunct professors provides a mechanism for safeguarding the educational growth of pupils in the preservice teacher's classroom.

Each year's practicum and laboratory experiences are similar in that they include: (a) seminars for conceptualizing and reflecting,

(b) hands-on teaching experiences, (3) guided systematic observations, and (d) constructive feedback from professional (campus and school-based) educators, peers, and self. Each student spends approximately 350-400 hours participating in a variety of practicum and laboratory experiences each academic year. How these experiences differ each year is discussed in the "content" section which follows.

## Content

The practicum experience for freshmen, entitled Teaching Early Experience (TEE), see Figure 1, emphasizes guided observation and direct teaching in various institutional settings. Participating students spend two, four-hours days per week for 33 weeks in school and/or agency settings; concurrently, they attend two one-and-one-half hour seminars designed to guide teacher self-directing processes and insights. Student experiences include: (a) direct whole-class "mini-teaching" opportunities, (b) directed systematic observations, (c) tutorial or small group enabling sessions that provide for student sharing, and (d) student self-evaluations of videotapes of each of the above experiences. (TEE) introduces students to a minimum of three teaching environments at least one of which must be a non-school, community-based setting such as nursing home or local hospital (Howsam, 1976). For example, a health education preservice teacher might spend the first eleven weeks teaching holistic health content to gifted children in a high SES sixth grade class, the second eleven weeks instructing family life classes in a low SES "open" junior high classroom, and the third eleven weeks discussing stress management with seizure-prone teenagers at the

local YMCA. First-year students are encouraged to participate in a variety of settings differing as to grade, SES, subject matter philosophy, and physical facilities. This introduction to a variety of teaching environments will enable them to make more realistic decisions concerning teacher career plans.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Sophomore On-Campus Laboratory Experiences (SOLE) is offered during the second year and generally is campus-based. The student practices a wide range of basic teaching "patterns" (Powell, 1978) moving from microteaching to simulations and eventually to reflective teaching laboratory experiences (Cruickshank, Note 2). Most of the teaching will be practiced before peers who provide feedback. This immediate feedback and opportunity for self-evaluation is a rarity in most student teaching situations due to the demanding schedule of the school day. Such interaction also provides for a sharing of common concerns and problems. To gain more reality, the preservice teacher may elect to teach elementary or secondary school-age children instead of peers. Within course confines, activities will be individualized, personalized, and offered on a flexible schedule basis. The intent is that each student will achieve minimum conpetency in selected teaching skills (Howsam, 1976) These skills are jointly delineated and defined by professor and student.

Student Teaching Program (STP) encompasses the third year practicum and laboratory experience. Eleven weeks of planning instructional ex-

periences for their own specific teaching situation precedes eleven weeks of full-time teaching while eleven weeks of review, evaluation, and planning for remedial skill development next year concludes the junior year. As stated earlier, all cooperating teachers are adjunct professors who serve to bridge the gap between the teacher education institution and the public schools. They act as seminar facilitators (along with the college professors) for the Student Teaching Experience in addition to coordinating the preservice teacher's activities in the school (Howe as cited in McCarty, 1973). Adjunct professors are assigned to student teachers based on their ability to help these preservice teachers improve on their specific weaknesses as evidenced by student first year practicum evaluations (Silberman, 1970).

Advanced Teaching Experience (ATE) enables senior preservice teachers to refine generic teaching skill patterns which they value. It also permits remedial concentration on weak skill areas as revealed through student self-evaluations and (STP) supervisory evaluations. Simulations and reflective teaching lessons (these lessons provide opportunities for preservice teachers to present "mini-lessons" to their peers and then reflect on these presentations in a structured environment that is conducive to constructive feedback) (Cruickshank, Note 2) are the primary instructional alternatives. The fourth-year student also interacts with freshman students in the (TEE) program. They function as co-facilitators with campus-based professors during the two one-and-one-half hour seminars. Acting in this role enables the senior student to clarify further his philosophy of teaching while broadening the first year students' perceptions of teaching, teachers, and the preservice curriculum.

Follow-up of graduates is facilitated by the Graduate Evaluation Experience (GEE), a six week seminar workshop to which first-year post graduation teachers return in order to earn six graduate credit hours and to have their provisional diplomas confirmed. The intent of this workshop is to provide the following opportunities:

1. For first year teachers to evaluate and receive feedback concerning their first year teaching experiences. These experiences are documented by videotapes, logs, and a variety of teacher concern checklists.

2. For first year teachers to receive remedial and refining laboratory learning opportunities to upgrade skills and subject knowledge acquisition which they deem important.

3. For campus-based professors to evaluate on-the-job performances of their program's finished products, i.e., teachers.

4. For campus-based personnel to receive student feedback concerning the preservice teacher education program.

Summary

Practicum and laboratory experiences have been primarily equated with student teaching. This is a time when students pull together all prior learnings and apply them in a teacher-learner environment. But, as outlined above, student teaching need not be the single, most predominant practicum and laboratory experience in the teacher education curriculum. Hopefully, more concrete, "on-hands" type experiences which reinforce relevant theory will become essential to teacher preparation programs. How then can practicum and laboratory experiences reach their potential? Smith (1970) suggests the following:

The effectiveness of clinical experiences is largely determined by the extent to which they are an integral part of a comprehensive teacher education program. If the analytical experience is to illustrate an educational principle, the relationship must be clear. If theory is to be tested and applied, the clinical experience must be fashioned to that end. It is not enough that elements of the program are scheduled during the same semester or that course work occurs concurrently with direct and simulated experiences. The program must be planned to clarify relationships and provide opportunities within the context of the total program. (p. 15)

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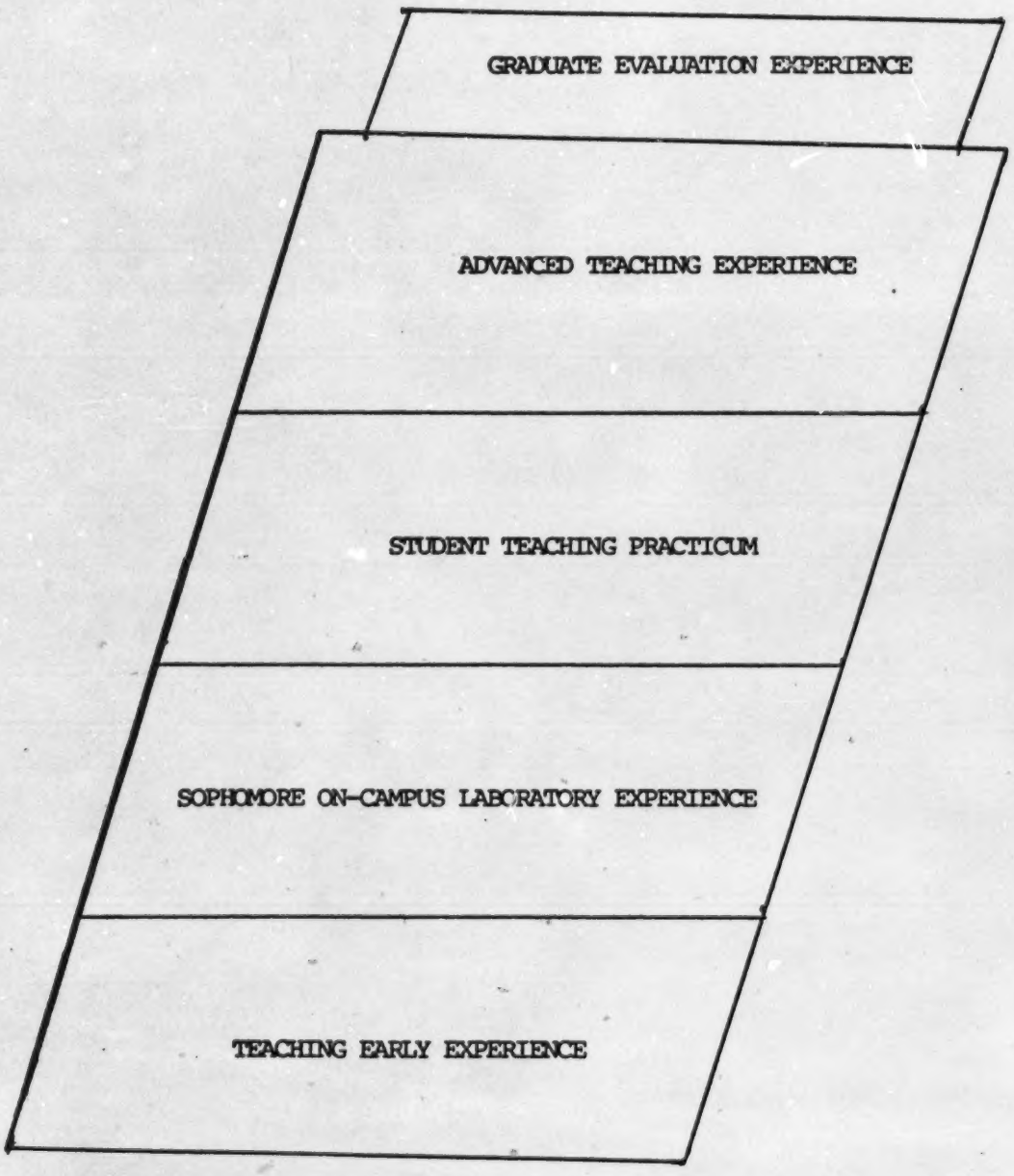
## Figure Caption

**Figure 1.** Practicum and laboratory experiences: A Conceptual Model.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